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ABSTRACT

Recently, rhetoricians have been trying to explain the absence of women from the history of rhetoric by locating female rhetoricians in classical era canonical texts. This effort, similar in intent to the movement towards redefining the literary canon, challenges the traditional Western rhetorical canon to create a more inclusive and accurate representation of its history. It is time to call for a new definition of rhetoric, one that broadens its scope beyond the modern interpretations of Platonic and Aristotelian traditions of public agonistic argumentation among peers. Within the realm of this new understanding of rhetoric will be the discourse practices of those not permitted regular participation in the traditional forum. Scholars should consider the discursive practices outside the "agora" under contemporary perceptions of rhetoric, and by doing so rewrite rhetorical history from classical times to the present, including a consideration of the rhetoric of the oppressed. In this case, the oppressed groups are wives and/or relatives of legitimate male citizens. In ancient Athens, any speech by women was grounded in the premise that they were of inferior status addressing an audience of superiors, which prohibited their ability to argue publicly. In fact, wives of legitimate citizens were so secluded from the public that they were prohibited from negotiating in the marketplace. The religious expressivist participation they were permitted (such as the cult of the goddess Athena) provided them with one of their only forums for discourse. (Contains 43 references.) (TB)

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# A Forum of Their Own: Rhetoric, Religion, and Female Participation in Ancient Athens

Prepared for presentation at the 1995 Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition

Recently rhetoricians have been trying to explain the absence of women from the history of rhetoric by locating female rhetoricians in classical era canonical texts. This effort, similar in intent to the movement towards redefining the literary canon, challenges the traditional Western rhetorical canon to create a more inclusive and accurate representation of its history. My purpose in this paper, in part an extension of this restorative effort, is to call for a new definition of rhetoric, one which broadens its scope beyond the modern interpretations of Platonic and Aristotelian traditions of public agonistic argumentation among peers; within the realm of this new understanding of rhetoric will be the discourse practices of those not permitted regular participation in the traditional forum. The present academic perception of that era as a homogenous, democratic, all-male public domain hardly represents contemporary rhetorical forums, academic or otherwise. Therefore, I argue that we should also consider the discursive practices outside the agora under contemporary perceptions of rhetoric, and by doing so rewrite rhetorical history from classical times to the present, including a consideration of the rhetoric of the oppressed; for the scope of this paper I will discuss one of those oppressed groups, women as wives or relatives of legitimate male citizens.

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If rhetoric is solely the practice of public peer persuasion based on logical argument and resolving with an immutable truth, then women are by definition excluded from participation throughout history until recently, since women have not traditionally been "peers" to men, academically, socially, or professionally. I believe, however, that because this definition of rhetoric depends upon verbal opposition, disagreement, and debate, much of what we would consider rhetoric today would be excluded. Instead I would begin by drawing on feminist rhetorician Jan Swearingen's argument for the re-establishment of positive value judgments for the traditionally feminine expressive discourse and "conceptions of persuasion, feeling, thought, belief, and truth." Swearingen argues that, in considering *pistis* (proof or belief) and *pathos* (emotions) in classical rhetoric, "A feminist rhetoric of motives can recover the voices and philosophies of women in classical antiquity by restoring to feminine traits and voices the honor of a tradition and by granting them the human quality of agency" (128). By granting this agency, I argue that women in religious cults in the classical era did not act as puppets mouthing ritualistic monologues but employed an expressivistic rhetoric in line with the Greek concept of *pistis*.

If *public* political rhetoric necessitates a position of empowerment, then women would have been excluded from practicing oratory in the agora. Any speech by women was grounded in the premise that they were of inferior status addressing an audience of superiors, which prohibited their ability to publicly argue; in fact, wives of legitimate citizens were so secluded from public that they were prohibited from negotiating in the marketplace, so to have attempted entrance into the even more exclusive male-run political arenas would have been life-threatening. Due to their status they would have had to find a separate means of or alternative forum for communicating and exerting

influence in their society; the religious expressivist participation they were permitted would have provided them with that forum. Swearingen argues that modern interpretations of emotion and reason as male-female binary oppositions cloud proper interpretation of classical philosophy, which considered the relationships between feeling and thought, heart and mind, more as complementary (125). She states that "these female [religious] voices were a public presence alongside the speeches of statesmen and Sophists. . . Not only the historical reality of women teachers, priestesses, and wisdom figures in the 7th and 6th c. BCE but also the literary representations of their speech invite attention to nuances of kinds of thought and language that were, and are, embodied in the feminine qualities and characters" (129).

I believe that religious rites and women's significant roles in cult activities provided them with the forum they needed to gain the more privileged audience without alienating them, causing social unrest, or risking personal harm. Denied intellectual capabilities for discovering philosophical truth, women looked to a yet higher power the men would respect--the truth of their deities, an integral and powerful factor in Athenian society--to provide authority for a rhetoric of their own. If we frame classical women's discourse in a contemporary model of feminine rhetorical styles as expressivist, communal, and noncompetitive, then we can understand these religious activities as women's rhetoric authorized by the gods and the male understanding of how women could and should behave as their counterparts.

Religious participation provided women with the only regular, permitted means of gathering and appearing publicly as a community. The religious forum provided them with an authority as representatives and interpreters of the goddesses the whole society worshiped and celebrated. In the

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literary work of Euripides and Aristophanes, the artistic depictions on sculpture, vases, and the Parthenon friezes, and historical documents such as letters, laws, and religious tablets women's names and actions are recorded as priestesses, guardians, and servants of particular deities (see Just, Lefokowitz and Fant, Zaidman).

Typically confined to the home, women were expected not only to be silent but invisible as well; Pericles admonished women that "the greatest glory would accrue to the woman who was least talked about by men, whether in complimentary or scandalous terms" (Pomeroy 74). However, religious rites such as funeral proceedings, the cult of the goddess Athena, and the exclusively female festivals such as the Thesmophoria, offered opportunities for Athenian's recognition of women's importance and a forum for community. Lefkowitz and Fant state that "the politically oppressed often turn to ecstasy as a temporary means of possessing the power they otherwise lack; orgiastic ritual, secret cults, trances, and magic provided such outlets, especially for women, who could not justify meeting together for any other purpose" (113).

One opportunity women had for public discourse was the funeral, where they were present to openly and publicly lament the death of a loved one. The more female mourners present, the more important the deceased. This practice included not only family members but even hired women; these women found opportunity for expression through vocal mourning in the funeral procession, which was followed by a public oration by a male. Relics remaining from the period depict women in traditional postures of mourning, in "classic gestures of female grief with both hands raised, or performing the ritual funerary dances, or beating their heads and tearing their hair." Pomeroy cites literary references for the verbal expression of grief, which ranged from "wordless

keening to a formal antiphonal song" (44). Women's public sorrow was more permissible than men's, and they took advantage of this counterpart to the male eulogy as an opportunity to express themselves publicly and to make money. The significance of this activity is evidenced in the frequency which women are depicted on funeral urns and other artifacts, and the organized, formal, nature of their utterances and actions. Men, for whom expressing emotional grief was inappropriate, were responsible for delivering a more restrained, individual speech; the funeral of an honored and respected figure, however, was incomplete without the female group expression of deeply emotional though equally formal grief.

In fact, women may have gained too much importance and authority through this means, judging from Solon's 6th century laws intended to limit women's participation and influence (Pomeroy 57). Since the female relatives of legitimate citizens were restricted in their access to public spaces their noticeable presence at public funerals, particularly the well-attended ceremonies for aristocratic figures or soldiers fallen at war, would have been disturbing to the dominant class of citizen men, ultimately undermining their total regulation of public spaces. We can imagine the frequency with which women would have appeared formally in public during a time of war when Athens' most important residents--citizen male soldiers in the prime of life--would have been dying at an increased frequency.

According to Plutarch, Solon's laws "did away with disorder and license" (Fantham et al. 46). Pomeroy argues that these laws, which limited the attire, behavior, and number of women at public funerals, were direct attempts to exert power over a legally powerless group which may have been gaining too much access to the public sphere and a measure of influence in the community.

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Solon surely would not have felt it necessary to impose the laws unless the women were beginning to act with "license." Roger Just argues that these laws were written against the public lamentation of the dead "for fear of the very disturbance it created" (111). Mourning during wartime, particularly, could potentially have a negative impact on the community in that members of Athenian society would have a constant reminder of the number of dead and perhaps become disillusioned with the war itself.

Activities conducted by the cult of the goddess Athena presented another outlet for women's public expression. Religion was an integral part of Athenian life, and the priestess for the patron goddess of Athens played no small role in the community. Secrets belonging to this cult are still unknown, but the priestess and her helpers were of great importance to ensuring the life and safety of the Athenian culture out of their service to the goddess. The priestess of Athena Polias was a person of some influence, and she inherited her title as a member of a noble Athenian family. Pomeroy cites two occasions which remain as evidence of the political importance of the priestess in her actions on behalf of democratic factions. First, the priestess denied access to the shrine of Athena to Spartan King Cleomenes, who attempted to "meddle in Athenian politics" (75); the priestess succeeded by citing the law that foreigners were not permitted into the shrine. Second, the priestess "supported the decision to evacuate Athens before the battle of Salamis in 480 BCE by reporting that the sacred snake of Athena had already departed from the Acropolis" (75).

In considering these actions rhetorically, it is important to remember that the priestess was endowed with authority as a speaker for Athena. She circumvented her inferior position as a woman by speaking from an authority even greater than that of the political orators, who would then have

become an audience capable of persuasion through direct commands or advice. While the female mourners in Athens used their status and the men's understanding of them as emotional creatures to access the public spheres, the priestess used the superior status of the patron goddess to form her *ethos*. Women who participated in this cult were often honored as a result of their status as intermediaries between powerful and potentially malevolent deities. Cult members served as negotiators between Athena and the mere mortals perhaps similarly to the orators' roles as intermediaries in the polis between the citizen class and the unrepresented non-citizens--women, slaves, and foreigners

The Thesmophoria and the Panathenaia were important festivals held in Athens to honor goddesses Demeter and Athena. Both festivals featured females of unblemished reputation and status as participants, and females began participating as young girls, their roles increasing in importance as they passed puberty and became of marriageable age. Euripides' *Lysistrata* shows evidence of the importance of these roles both to the women and to the city itself when, confronted by men trying to squelch the women's efforts in ending a war, the chorus of women cites their authority to their mocking audience:

> Then, citizens, hear what I have to say. I have useful counsel to give our city, which deserves it well at my hands for the brilliant distinctions it lavishes on my girlhood. At seven years of age, I carried the sacred vessels; at ten, I pounded barley for the altar of Athene; next, clad in a robe of yellow silk, I played bear to Artemis at Brauronia; presently, when I was grown up, a tall, handsome maiden, they put a necklace of dried figs about my neck, and I was one of the Canephori. (54:101)

This defense of authority illustrates women's value to the city's function; women's participation in these festivals offered them the opportunity to contribute to the welfare of the city-state (Fantham et al. 83), since proper respect to patron deities was crucial to their continued goodwill and support.

Similar to the Panathenaia, the rituals of the Thesmophoria belonged to women acting on behalf of the city to ensure its human and agricultural fertility. Women fasted and remained chaste for three days, separated from the community in their organized ritual secret-sharing and initiation of new members into Demeter's cult. Zaidman cites Aristophanes' *The Women of the Thesmophoria* as in illustration of this festival, stating that "the 'demos of women' took possession of the political sphere abandoned by men, who ceased to meet in law courts or council. . . [they] adopted the vocabulary of men . . . their prayers, formulas, and formalities mimic the traditional forms of the assembly meeting" (350). Zaidman argues that this dramatic representation of women as political influences at the Thesmophoria is supported by epigraphs and speeches by various orators (350).

That the women banded together publicly without the aid or dictates of men is significant; the fact that this festival was considered important enough for dramatic illustration, mention in speeches, and artistic representation on the Parthenon friezes is evidence of women's considerable value, albeit intermittent, to Athenian culture. Women did not write laws or participate in everyday political debate, but their participation in Athenian religious culture is hardly only symbolic. In order to preserve the social harmony which was the only means of ensuring their personal safety, women had to negotiate within the confines of their lower status to achieve public identities. That the roles they were permitted to act were largely limited to wives and relatives of citizen males suggests a parallel forum to the agora; Athenian society, even in its ideal of democracy, was

structured around status and a power hierarchy which often separated women and men in nearly mutually exclusive arenas. Evidence suggests that privileged women exerted considerable influence in Athenian culture, albeit in a separate forum and by using a rhetoric of expression, which relied on the community's faith and beliefs. The legal realm was male and rational, the spiritual one female and emotional. The very fact that laws such as Solon's were periodically written suggests that men felt it necessary to exert legal influence over women who challenged their dominance with their own public utterances.

The stories which have been handed down to us over history suggest that men conducted all the relevant business in ancient Greece, and that privileged women sat contentedly powerless at home dictating commands to slaves. We should not forget the significance of religion in the lives of the Greeks, who entrusted the spiritual rites largely to women. While men governed the realm of the rational and explicable, women were the intercessors to the inexplicable--and thus more frightening--deities. Since women had no rhetorical authority in the agora, they employed a "divine" rhetoric as priestesses, prophetesses, and celebrants. I believe that we should reconsider our modern understanding of classical rhetoric, realizing the selectivity of a history written by and for men in the postromantic era; I believe that this will open a legitimate avenue for feminist rhetoricians seeking to rewrite the canon to include women and provide the academy with a broader, more accurate, and ultimately more pedagogically useful understanding of rhetoric.

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Notes

1. It is important to make this distinction between wives and daughters of citizens and other women in Athens, such as female slaves, prostitutes, and foreign women. There were degrees of freedom and titles afforded to each, and women who could be documented as daughters of legitimate citizens were the only ones who could produce citizen males; therefore they were the most protected and sheltered women (as the only insurance of the continuation of the society). However, they were also more restricted than the hetarae, or foreign companion women, who were often more educated and were held in higher esteem than prostitutes or slaves. The hetarae enjoyed freedom to move about more publicly even though they could not marry citizens or provide them with legitimate heirs. Aspasia, recently the subject great debate in the rhetoric academic community, was a hetara and the companion of Pericles. It has been argued that Aspasia was not only beloved by Pericles but also served as a muse, teacher, and philosopher in her own right--some argue that she wrote Pericles' famous funeral oration. However, as much significance as Aspasia may have to rhetorical studies, it is important to remember that she was not an Athenian native or married to a citizen (she was from Miletus), so though she may have been more educated and more free to move about publicly, her role would have been limited in participating in a number of activities reserved for Athenian citizens wives and daughters, and her status would have been lower than that of the native Athenian women. (See Glenn, Swearingen, Pomeroy, Just, Cantarella, Clark)

2. For further discussion specifically on this topic, see also John Gould; Gould argues against A.W. Gomme's and subsequent positions which describe Athenian women's lives as comparably free to those of modern women. Gould makes several important points, including the one that social status is not exclusive of political status, so the lack of property and voting rights necessarily sublimates women, making them perpetual dependents. His position is that Gomme's argument is a "simplistic fantasy" (42) based on rationalization and wishful thinking. Gould's evidence in opposition is the laws which specifically designate women as dependent. The significance of women's names appearing on inscriptions is not unremarkable, since it was generally considered inappropriate for a respectable woman to be named publicly; exceptions were primarily priestesses, whose names were inscribed in religious contexts (Fantham et al. 81). Kitto's argument uses vase paintings and literary representations of women for evidence, presented through his own rhetorical questions and opinions, such as his argument that even though boys were sent to school and girls were not, this was no great advantage: "reading and writing were taught, but these rudiments could not have taken very long" (232). The relevant point, however, is not how long boys studied reading, but the fact that they studied it at all and that girls did not, even briefly. Furthermore, in a bit of a logical leap based on his 1950s perceptions of motherhood and legitimacy, he argues that because wives were the only ones who could produce legitimate heirs, they were necessarily valued (231).

Though Kittos's argument is admirable in its attempt to dispel historical opinion that Athenian women were despised, his use of vase paintings and literature as a source for women's equal social position is insufficient evidence that they were free from oppression. He neglects to inform us that these vase paintings primarily depict women indoors (except those which depict

religious activity or at fountains collecting water) (Lissarrague 194-204), and except for representations of prostitutes women were depicted clothed, even alongside naked males (Pomeroy 142-3); this supports the theory of seclusion more than Kitto's position that they moved freely in public. Pomeroy argues that Kitto and Moses Hadas, who also supported Gomme's position, "were victims of their own times and social backgrounds" (59), and that Gomme and his supporters depend almost wholly on dramatic references without considerable attention to archeological or oratorical evidence; on the other hand, the proponents who argue for women's complete obscurity and lack of status depend solely on the Attic orators for support (59-60).

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